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### Making meaningful connections

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# **Making meaningful connections: Using insights from social pedagogy in statutory child and family social work practice**

**Ruch, G., Winter, K., Cree, V., Hallett, S., Morrison, F. and Hadfield, M.**

## **Abstract**

Reports into incidents of child death and serious injury have highlighted consistently concern about the capacity of social workers to communicate skilfully with children. Drawing on data collected as part of an Economic and Social Research Council funded UK-wide research project exploring social workers' communicative practices with children, this paper explores how approaches informed by social pedagogy can assist social workers in connecting and communicating children. The qualitative research included data generated from 82 observations of social workers' everyday encounters with children. Social pedagogical concepts of 'haltung' (attitude), 'head, heart and hands' and 'the common third' are outlined as potentially helpful approaches for facilitating the intimacies of inter-personal connections and enhancing social workers' capacity to establish and sustain meaningful communication and relationships with children in the face of austere social, political and organisational contexts.

**Key words:** communication, connection, statutory child and family social work, social pedagogy

## **Communicating with children: Contemporary policy and practice**

As highlighted in reviews of UK-based child abuse inquiries, concerns regarding social workers' capacity to communicate with children have exercised the profession over a significant period of time (Ofsted, 2011; Reder & Duncan, 2004; Winter, 2011). A recurrent theme, alongside equally chronic concerns about inter-professional communication, has been the quality and nature of social workers' relationships with children and, in particular, the lack or poor quality of communication between the social worker and the child. In response, and under various UK governments, there have been significant developments in law and policy aimed at addressing gaps in social work practice, most recently culminating in the Children and Families Act (2014) in England, the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act (2014), the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act (2014) and in Northern Ireland new draft guidelines for cases coming to the attention of social services (DHSSPSNI, 2015). These developments emphasise: placing the child at the centre of all that is done and never losing sight of them; listening to the child and understanding their perspective, and respecting and responding to the views and experiences of the child as legitimate in their own right. In England, for example, supported by government guidance (see Department of Education, 2015), there is a clear expectation that social workers should have the ability to communicate with children, that they should be creative and imaginative in finding ways to communicate and that they

should make available a range of methods to children to facilitate the communicative process.

On closer inspection, these legal and policy developments, which primarily focus on listing what should be done and with what methods, raise broader questions about what is really meant by 'effective communication' and how its core ingredients can best be identified, described and conveyed to social workers through their professional education and continuing professional development. Reports and guidance (Oliver, 2010; Munro, 2011a, b) define effective communication as combining several key components namely: activities (speaking, listening, observing); purposes (assessment, information sharing, offering support); qualities (warmth, empathy, authority); ideal conditions (calm, uninterrupted, safe); and methods (tools, aids and prompts). How all these diverse dimensions of the communicative act are reconciled and realised is not so readily addressed.

Achieving effective communication is further complicated by the challenges associated with the widespread adoption of a New Public Management model of practice within the child and family social work sector (Gruening, 2001). Despite attempts to identify, understand and minimise the negative impacts that have accompanied these developments, notably increasingly bureaucratised and prescriptive practices, these trends persist (Munro, 2011a, b).

Little research has generated detailed empirical data on everyday, communicative social work practices, with the exception of recent work by Broadhurst and Mason

(2014), Ferguson (2014a, 2014b) and Westlake (2015). This paper contributes to the growing knowledge-base, drawing as it does on empirical data from two phases of an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded project - the Talking and Listening to Children (TLC) project - and applying a social pedagogical lens to analyse data derived from observation of encounters between children and their social workers and interviews with the social workers. The paper develops theoretically-informed insights to equip practitioners to make meaningful connections and to undertake the relationship-based work they need and want to undertake, in what are still widely-recognised as challenging, overly-bureaucratised, prescriptive and authoritarian professional contexts (Broadhurst et al, 2010).

### **Social Pedagogy – key concepts and principles**

Social pedagogical principles can be traced back through history (Hämäläinen, 2003; Lorenz, 2008; Eichsteller & Holthoff, 2010) and have been applied in a variety of ways. In the context of child and family social work, a social pedagogical framework offers a way of exploring and engaging with what have become the neglected emotional dimensions of relational and communicative encounters between social workers and children (Hämäläinen, 2003; Smith & Whyte, 2008; Stephens, 2009). It is not, however, 'a method' or 'a set of methods' but rather *an approach* that is best represented by describing its underlying principles. Derived from the work of Natorp (1898) and Pestalozzi (1907) and comprised of several core tenets, detailed below, social pedagogy, metaphorically speaking:

is concerned with the theory and practice of creating a 'thriving garden for children', and indeed for all human beings – a fertile environment conducive to their well-being and learning, developing their inherent resources and connecting them to their surroundings (Eichsteller & Holthoff, 2010, p. 33).

Characteristics include: respect for individuals' inherent worth; a belief in people's potential; interconnectivity - of thought, feelings and actions and of the professional, personal and private selves; and the fundamental importance of trusting relationships. Key social pedagogical concepts that further explain these characteristics include 'haltung', 'head-heart-hands' and 'the common third'.

Closely translated, 'haltung' means 'disposition' and refers to the overall mindset, attitude and demeanour of an individual. 'Haltung' requires practitioners to engage holistically, bringing all aspects of their being - rational, emotional and practical - into their professional relationships. A social pedagogue's 'haltung' is intrinsic to their 'self': 'it is that 'self' that the social pedagogue utilises in working with others and which contributes to the development of suitably close and authentic relationships' (Smith, 2010, p.6). Linked to 'haltung' is the emphasis on the 'head-heart-hands' motif that defines a social pedagogical approach and represents the engagement of professionals with individual children or adults through the application of thinking, feeling and doing, each being of equal importance in professional relationships. At a practical level, this is concerned with the idea that, in their daily practice, social workers use a combination of 'intellectual, practical and emotional qualities' (Smith, 2010, p. 6). The holistic use of self underpins the development of authentic and

trusting relationships. It requires the practitioner to exercise high levels of self-awareness and self-reflection to ensure that the professional and personal selves are on display in the workplace, but that the private self is not. Shared activity-based encounters are also considered pivotal to a social pedagogy approach. Known as the 'common third', such activity represents a shared interest, a common point of contact around which a series of tasks are organised from start to finish, creating a sense of shared ownership, shared vision and shared interests (Smith 2010).

These three social pedagogical practices are enhanced by the related concept of 'connectivity' (Garfat, 2004; Krueger, 1994): internal connectivity refers to the inter-relationship between how we think, what we do and how we feel and external connectivity to the inter-relationship between ourselves and those around us. We will now consider the contribution a social pedagogical approach can make by looking in more detail at findings from our research.

### **The research project**

The data we have drawn on for this paper were gathered as part of the TLC project, conducted between 2013 and 2016. The project involved fieldwork conducted in local authority children's services teams across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales and specifically researched what happens in everyday, live, communicative encounters between social workers and children. The project had three phases (see Author forthcoming paper). In brief, phase one involved

researchers being embedded in eight fieldwork teams (for six to eight weeks in each), accompanying social workers on their visits, conducting pre-visit and post-visit interviews and observing and taking notes of the visit as it unfolded. Data from 82 visits were collected as well as extensive field notes from the team-based observations. Phase two involved the use of the video-stimulated recall (VSR) method (Haw and Hadfield, 2011) where we recorded ten interactions between social workers and children and then discussed the interaction with each of the participants to ascertain their views about the nature and content of the communicative encounter. Phase three of the TLC project (on-going at the time of writing) involves the development of digital professional development materials for social workers. Ethical approval for the project was obtained from a university and the participating local authorities, with the Northern Ireland jurisdiction having additional ethical requirements that were met.

We have focused in this article on examples of practice taken from the pre- and post-encounter interviews and the initial stages of three encounters, drawn from phases one and two of the fieldwork. Whilst there was variation in the specific purpose of each of the meetings, they were all focused on safeguarding concerns and were illustrative of ordinary, everyday social work encounters. It is important to emphasise that these examples, however, are only that - examples from a much bigger dataset. Yet we also acknowledge that it is in such encounters (the ordinary, the everyday) that a richly-nuanced illumination of social work can be found,



providing provenance from well beyond the cases explored. All names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

## **Exploring Communication and Connection**

### ***Making a connection: Carly and Maggie***

In phase one of the project, Maggie, a family practitioner with over ten years of experience of working with children and young people in child and family social work was meeting Carly, aged seven, for the first time following a referral from the school; Carly had arrived at school with a bite mark which her mother admitted to inflicting on Carly in retaliation for Carly biting her younger brother. Having met earlier in the day with Carly's mother, Maggie's role was to meet Carly and create a plan for direct work with her and her mother. The observed session was Maggie's first meeting with Carly. From the outset, the researcher's field notes capture Maggie's child-centred approach:

*Maggie comes through and says that we are ready to go and I get my things. She grabs the box of Lego and says that she is planning on making bracelets but she thinks maybe Carly might want to play with Lego. As we walk across to the car she says she always carries lots of things around with her as she is thinking what might they like to do which is going to help them trust her and to feel comfortable. She opens her car-boot and there are puppets and toys and boxes with paper in them in there. I say that I haven't seen a social worker with that amount of toys and things before and she says that she can't imagine how*

*people go about talking to children without them. We get into the car.*

*(Research field notes)*

In the course of the car journey to the home Maggie explained how she perceives her work. Acknowledging she is not quite sure how she will work with Carly, Maggie says:

*Maggie: So this is a bit kind of just suck it and see.*

*Researcher: OK.*

*Maggie: But already I'm thinking in my head oh I might use puppets with her, if she isn't a sort of an arts and crafts type... if she isn't a sort of arts and crafts type girl I might do those sorts of activities and obviously I'll chat to her a bit about what she's interested in as well. And then that just gives you a bit of a flavour for what you might want to do (Pre-visit interview).*

On arrival at the house, Maggie witnessed a stressful inter-change between Carly and her mother and entered into a domestic situation that was fraught with emotion. Despite this, Maggie carefully established a child-centred workspace in the sitting room:

*She [Maggie] sits cross-legged on the floor in the corner of the room by the window, with her pot of beads She opens the pot and Carly comes in and Maggie says in a calm matter-of-fact voice, 'Hello Carly, do you like making bracelets?' Carly says 'yes' and sits down next to her. Maggie says 'I thought so' and gets some elastic out and says that she first needs to make sure that*

*they have the right amount to thread. Carly holds her wrist out and they work out the elastic length together and agree that they will make it a little bit longer than they need so that they have room to tie it. Maggie says 'OK Carly let's decide what sort of bracelet you want to make and then when we are doing that, I'm going to tell you about who I am and why I am here'. Carly looks at her and nods. They sit together and discuss what beads Carly will use and what pattern she is going to make. Carly starts making the bracelet and Maggie says 'mummy said it was a stressful day today'. She sits next to Carly, side on and turns to face her.*

By the end of the visit, Carly had agreed to meet Maggie again in school, Carly's brother had become involved in seeing what was going on and Carly's mother positively affirmed Carly for a Lego panda she had built. Meaningful connections had been created with all three family members and a transformation in relationships had been achieved in a very short space of time. In her post-visit interview, Maggie continued with the theme of being child-centred:

*And she's ok about, you know, me going into school and that um...I think I'll need to explain the confidentiality bit again to her because she was quite focused on doing her beads so I think she only half heard me. Um...I always explain that to children because it's important to know that and it helps with the trust bit... And a lot of it is you know you've got a range of tools to draw on but a lot of it is suck and see...*

### ***Missing the connection: The Evans Family and Marie***

The Evans family, observed in phase one of the project, was comprised of Elaine (24 years old) and her two children Debra, aged eight years and Eddie, aged seven years, both of whom were the subject of child protection plans. Marie, the children's social worker (in her twenties and qualified for 2 years), was accompanied by the researcher on a regular statutory monitoring visit to the children and their mother, with whom she has worked for a year. As part of this visit, Marie also had to ascertain the children's wishes and feelings regarding a forthcoming child protection review case conference.

In her pre-visit interview, Marie expressed her concerns about the capacity of the children to engage with her:

*I found it really hard to engage with these children when I was first going out to see them. They didn't even...they always wanted their mum there but now they're happy enough for me to speak to them on their own (Research field notes).*

When asked whether the children know the reasons as to why Marie is involved, she said:

*I don't think so. Eddie is seven but he's got mild cerebral palsy and a recent diagnosis of epilepsy....um... he goes to a special school because he has mild learning difficulties though he seems to have really come out of himself*

*confidence wise but I don't think he understands what I'm doing (Research field notes).*

On arrival at the house the researcher recorded:

*The children are in the hallway – Debra [has] a plastic toy in her hand. It is a mini bongo drum with bells. She is shaking it at us and smiling. Eddie has a toy whistle that he blows at us as we enter the hallway (Research fieldnotes).*

In a short space of time, the children had made their presence known and indicated through their hosting of a noisy musical fanfare welcome that they were enthusiastic that the social worker had come to visit and were amenable to being engaged.

Marie's response to the welcome was recorded as follows:

*'Hello Debra what's this you've got?' (pointing to the toy), but does not wait for a reply as she is then lead into the front room by Elaine (Research field notes).*

Once Marie and Elaine had seated themselves in the front room and started talking, the children continued to make their presence known and show a willingness to engage with the social worker. However, it was Elaine, the mother, who drew Marie's attention for most of the time. In the latter part of the visit, Marie invited the children to complete happy/sad worksheets to express their current emotional state and their wishes and feelings regarding the forthcoming child protection

review case conference - the primary objective of the visit. Whilst the use of worksheets was clearly an attempt to introduce a 'common third' into the relationship, this did not work as well as it might have done, thereby raising questions about the authenticity of the children's responses.

In the course of the post-visit interview (in the car on the way back to the office), Marie reflected on what had happened and considered how she might have been more attuned to 'the music' in the room:

*Researcher: One of the things I noticed was they came in with toys, like Debra had the thing that makes a lot of noise and Eddie had the ball and I wondered if you'd thought about engaging with the toy?*

*Marie: Yea, cos it's like a bridge? An icebreaker when it's hard to talk about other stuff, yea. Maybe that's a way they are trying to reach out and...*

*Researcher: talk to you? Cos Debra brought in that little toy that's really important to her?*

*Marie: Yea that's actually true. She brought that in and I didn't really acknowledge it – d'you know what I mean? Just talking to her about it would be making a conversation with her 'cos it's not threatening....*

*Researcher: Yea. It's just interesting 'cos they are making a conversation but on their terms.*

*Marie: Yea, yea (laughing) that's a really good point. 'Cos if you notice the football as well and his new football shoes...*

*Researcher: Right, yea*

*Marie: I think that would have been a good thing to talk to him about (Interview transcript).*

### **Sustaining a connection: Stephen and Janet**

The third example comes from a meeting that was videoed as part of phase two of the project. Although the data drawn on here is from a different methodological phase of the project that involved video recording the encounter, the actual encounter observed and recorded was no different to other encounters observed in phase one, where the social workers were spending time with children in order to get to know them, to assess their circumstances and to ascertain their wishes and feelings.

Janet, an experienced senior social worker in her 40s, had recently started working with Stephen, a seven-year-old boy whose family were experiencing difficulties, which included incidents of domestic violence that were having an adverse impact on Stephen. This was Janet and Stephen's fourth weekly meeting and it took place in a designated playroom in a school, where they had met before. From Janet's pre-meeting interview comments, it was clear that at the outset of engaging with a

family she prioritised seeing children on their own and would do so regardless of whether appropriate facilities existed:

*Janet told me that whenever she gets a new child/young person to work with, she sees them once a week for about 8 weeks so that they can get to know one another. Thereafter, she can reduce contact to once a month or once a fortnight, depending on what the child's needs and situation are. She said she doesn't like 'Talking Mats' and the other tools that are being promoted just now – she'd rather play real games with the children and get to know them through that. She thinks she might be out of step in this – there's pressure to embrace the new tools. She was critical of the style of social work that is about form filling and ticking boxes – for example, "I consulted the child last week". Instead she argues that you have to build a relationship and this goes both ways, so she tells kids about herself, her kids, her holidays etc. (Research field notes).*

Janet's attitude displays both an unquestioning orientation towards the capacity of the children with whom she works to engage with her and an awareness of her critical part in achieving meaningful connection and engagement. The encounter itself demonstrates how she approaches each relationship in a unique and personal manner.

At the beginning of the meeting, Stephen huddled himself on the floor in the corner of the playroom and Janet took off her boots and lay down facing Stephen on her side, so as to be on the same level as him. A few minutes later, Janet stretched



across to Stephen and squeezed his leg. In the post-interview conversation when Janet and the researcher met to review the videoed recording, the researcher commented on Janet's action:

*Researcher): ... You stretched right forward and you grabbed his leg and I thought that was quite interesting, he didn't mind you doing that at all by the way.*

*Janet: It's a thing we do.*

*Researcher: But you wouldn't do it with an older young person, I bet?*

*Janet: And I wouldn't necessarily do it with other children but it's a thing, it's a joke that we do because mainly we're in the car and when we're having a carry on and I giggle, I grab, I do something to him that my dad used to do to me, it's a kind of grip above the knee and you just sort of crumble into giggles and he loves it and I do it to him all the time and it doesn't, it's not sore, but I grab him above the knee and I give him a tickle there and he falls about laughing. So I suppose I was really conscious of the fact he doesn't sit like this normally ever [the meeting was being filmed] so I was conscious that that was new for him and I leaned over to do that to him because a) its our thing but b) because I just wanted him to feel a bit connected even though he was sitting so far away. And that even though he was clearly doing that because things were different and he was needing the protection of the corner I was, I was just wanting him to remember that it was still me and it's still us and nothing is different (Interview transcript).*

The authenticity of the connection Janet had made with Stephen under these unusual circumstances was confirmed by the visible change in Stephen's demeanour from the outset of the meeting when he was huddled in the corner to the concluding section of the meeting when he lay sprawled out, in close proximity to Janet, mirroring her body language. Later in the session Janet, on her own admission, misjudges an intervention which results in Stephen disengaging slightly for a few moments. Despite this, it was apparent that the strength of Janet's relationship with Stephen overcame any one-off difficult moment in conversation, underlining the importance of practitioners having sufficient time to develop relationships and to make meaningful connections.

## **Discussion**

So what shared learning and insight can we take from these three encounters to help our understanding of what constitutes meaningful, connected communication with children? We are mindful that as researchers who have permission to open up practice to research, we have ethical responsibilities. It is not our place to either praise or blame social workers, but instead to ensure that that we adhere to our commitment to expand understanding of effective communication with children, in order to improve practice as a whole. Furthermore, we are aware of both the impact of our presence on the practice that we witnessed (affecting practitioners and children and parents), and the organisational contexts and cultures that bring considerable influence to bear on what does or does not happen in practice; the organisational context of practice will be the focus of a future TLC paper.

***Developing practitioner 'haltung' and recognising children's agency and uniqueness***

In each of the three cases presented, the extent to which the individual practitioners demonstrated 'haltung' was different and appeared to be associated with their expectations of children's agency. Both Maggie with Carly, and Janet with Stephen, demonstrated in their pre-interviews how they had developed certain *universal* practices with children, whilst at the same time they *customised* practices according to each individual child. Maggie's account demonstrated her professional authenticity and ability to adopt an open-minded, 'not knowing' position to what might work best, both core characteristics of 'haltung' and effective connections. As the field notes record, in the course of the 45-minute visit, Maggie managed to turn the difficult initial situation around through a child-centred attitude (haltung) that made sure she spent time discretely in a 'common third' activity with Carly, whilst using her 'head, hands and heart' to empathise with all the other parties involved i.e. Carly's mother and brother.

Janet described her standard practice when starting work with a family of always initially seeing children over several sessions on their own, in order to get to know them in their own right, recognising that within this standard practice what unfolded in each session was unique to each child. In the initial phase of the recorded exchange with Stephen, Janet demonstrated her disposition and 'haltung' towards

him by using her knowledge of their relationship (her head), a physical interaction (her hands) and her empathic sensibility towards Stephen being unfamiliar with the videoing process (her heart) to create a safe environment for him to relate to her in.

For practitioners to be able to establish and sustain meaningful encounters with children requires them to be attuned to and not afraid of the harsh realities of human need and impoverishment, able to draw on a breadth of approaches to communicate and relate effectively (Lefevre, 2010). As Janet's behaviour demonstrates everyday communication and connections are multi-faceted and involve a complex series of inextricably inter-related intimate interactions - words, facial and hand gestures, body positions, touches, sounds and silences.

An important element of social pedagogically informed practice is the social worker's capacity to respond to the uniqueness of each child. Attending to uniqueness was illustrated in numerous observations where social workers had established and enacted particular rituals in the encounters, remembered important details about a child or began a relationship by finding out important facts about a child. For Janet, it was her habit of tickling of Stephen on the knee. For others, it included remembering a child's favourite biscuit or recalling something that had happened in the previous meeting, creating a sense of being 'held in mind'. In a similar vein, a social worker establishing a new relationship with a child paid particular attention to how she invited the child into the room where the meeting was being held, invited

her to choose a chair and adjusted it, as it was a swivel desk chair, to her correct height. These small acts of attention to detail are not only respectful of the child but can become, as in Janet and Stephen's relationship, important personally-customised rituals and unique features of the professional encounters.

In contrast, Marie's pre-interview remarks suggested that she held lower expectations of children's agency and had pre-determined activities she was planning to use to ascertain their wishes and feelings. Her post-interview comments highlighted her insight into the visit dynamics and her immediate recognition, on reflection, that she could have used the toys the children had presented her with more effectively to make a connection. This encounter was made harder for Marie, of course, by the need to simultaneously attend to the needs of Elaine and of the children. Janet did not have to address competing dynamics in the room, whilst Maggie managed this challenge by creating a discrete and boundaried space to work with Carly. This common, everyday conundrum for social workers of working out how to respond simultaneously to the needs of children and their parents was a recurring feature of our data.

### ***Resourcing pedagogic practice***

At a very concrete level, it was surprising to note within the project how few social workers had any materials to use with children. Instances of social workers having boxes of toys and creative materials were rare, but where they existed the practice

they demonstrated was frequently impressive. Focusing on two examples where the social workers are 'the exception to the rule', that is, they had creative materials with them, suggests they do not accurately represent everyday practice. Whilst to some extent true, these examples highlight what can be achieved in everyday routine encounters, illustrating the potential that a 'common third' approach offers to practitioners. Simultaneously they underline that creative materials, in their own right, are not sufficient to facilitate a meaningful connection. Whether they are purposefully-designed resources for social workers or adapted from everyday games, the effectiveness of a 'common third' to make a meaningful connection is contingent on how it is used and on the quality of the relationship in which it is located. Choosing good, albeit exceptional, research-informed practice exemplars is of particular importance in the current climate where the obstacles to communicating and engaging with children are more familiar to practitioners than the opportunities (Lefevre, 2010; Author's own, 2009).

The fact that using creative resources was the exception, rather than the rule for practitioners in the TLC project, suggests two key inter-related and concerning issues. Firstly, it emphasises the inability of employing organisations to recognise what practitioners need to do their work; where practitioners did have creative materials to hand they had often brought them (and paid for them) themselves. Secondly, a significant number of the practitioners we observed did not appear confident in using a range of methods in communicating with children. Rather than simply thinking about this as a skills' gap on the part of individual practitioners, we believe

it also reflects organisational culture; the lack of creativity in thinking about practice is also attributable to the impoverished mindsets of the organisations that many practitioners found themselves located in. Social pedagogic approaches encourage the creative use of all sorts of 'common third' activities, often, as the examples drawn on illustrate, everyday activities that already exist and can be readily incorporated into the encounter. Our research suggests that the significance of this practical and attitudinal element of the everyday encounter needs to be better understood and embraced.

### ***Non-linear communication patterns and practitioner agency***

A noticeable feature of all the encounters we observed was the non-linear nature of the social worker-child communication process. The project findings highlighted the importance of social workers developing both their confidence in the agency and ability of children to say what needs saying/expressing and their ability to recognise that it will be communicated often unexpectedly and not necessarily through direct or straightforward processes. Acquiring and exercising a 'haltung' that has an understanding of and conviction about children's agency and the ability to creatively use the head, heart and hands to respond, we would argue are essential social work skills. Of particular importance is the intuitive sensitivity of practitioners to resist the urge to force a conversation or raise an issue too quickly or directly.

Cars and car journeys have long been noted as conducive spaces and places for conducting conversations with children (Ferguson, 2014, 2014a; Winnicott, 1963), as they avoid direct face-to-face contact whilst creating a sense of safety and intimacy. Creating a safe and appropriately intimate space, such as Maggie and Janet did, that involved activities that allowed eyes to be averted as required, affords similar opportunities for connection and communication to that offered by car journeys. Establishing familiar routines – the same place, same routine, same activities - also creates an importance sense of intimacy, ownership and continuity, which children value greatly. Such interactions are in their own right highly skilled and demanding. The challenge of achieving such connected and attuned encounters, however, is further exacerbated by the prevailing organisational and policy context, driven by bureaucratic, as opposed to child-centred, imperatives. In many instances practitioners were restricted to only one or a very small number of opportunities to engage with a child. More broadly, practice conditions frequently do not encourage or enable social workers to remain in posts long-term, exacerbating children's experiences of instability in their relationships with practitioners.

Building relationships, establishing communication and making connections in order to achieve the primary purpose of a social work intervention is undoubtedly a challenge. There is, however, no short-cut to completing an accurate assessment, facilitating a disclosure or ensuring a child feels heard and understood. It takes time and requires a genuine connection to be made. Our findings suggest that where meaningful connections are not achieved accurately informed social work



interventions and child-centred practice will be diminished. Janet's resolve to see Stephen regularly is a powerful statement of her pedagogically-informed professional commitment to human need over economic efficiency, which also has potential, in the long run, to be both humanely effective and economically efficient. Practitioners need to be professionally assertive, as exemplified by Janet's professional resolve to practise in this way, in order that the best interests of the child can be both promoted and protected. Understandably, less experienced practitioners may find such an approach harder to mobilise, particularly if their organisational context does not endorse and support it, but recognition of its importance begins to create the possibility for such sites of professional agency and assertion to develop.

### ***The individual-organisational interface***

The research examples highlight the important contribution that practitioners' values, beliefs and practices make to effective communication with children. This individual perspective, however, does not entirely account for the quality of communicative practices as the research also identified the considerable impact of organisational contexts on what social workers felt they could or could not achieve. As social pedagogic theoretical approaches recognise, to offer an attuned response to a child requires practitioners to be experiencing attuned responses to their own professional needs from supervisors, managers and peers (Cameron and Moss, 2011). The significance for effective, connected practice of practitioners feeling heard and understood was brought home to us through the organisational

observation data gathered in the course of this project. It was widely observed that there was a lack of space for social workers to plan effectively in relation to forthcoming encounters. Caseload demands, responding to emerging crises and organisational preoccupations with managing risk dominated practice, resulted in a lack of opportunity for social workers in some teams to adequately attend to the intimacies of inter-personal connections that occur within encounters with children.

This underlines the crucial importance of attending to the organisational-individual interface for effective practice. This claim is further substantiated by the finding from our observations that social pedagogic principles did not explicitly inform the practices of any of the wider organisational contexts in which the teams that were observed were located. As a consequence, a social pedagogic mindset did not filter down through the organisations to practitioners in the field. Whether social pedagogy was a feature of individual or team level practice, therefore, was largely idiosyncratic and contingent on the motivation, knowledge and skills of individual practitioners or managers. This was illustrated across the research project where teams located in the same organisational contexts, and even in some instances individuals within the same team, demonstrated contrasting approaches to practice.

## **Conclusion**

Social pedagogy invites all involved to attend to the intimacies of inter-personal connections. In the context of social workers' relationships with children and families,

who are invariably experiencing heightened levels of anxiety, exacerbated by financial austerity, establishing such connections is a challenging undertaking. One of the biggest challenges, however, is the financially driven, short-term-ism that is integral to current welfare policies and practices. Re-discovering a relational stance in social work is crucial if children's best interests are to be promoted and the worst effects of managerialism are to be averted. Social pedagogy appears to offer a fruitful theoretical and practical framework for assisting practitioners, working in a hostile political climate, to make meaningful connections with children and families. Bringing social pedagogy into social work practice encourages all relationships, however fleeting, to be shaped by a 'haltung' that embraces and builds on children's agency. The findings of this research suggest that this, in turn, will increase the likelihood that a meaningful connection and more effective practice, even in difficult circumstances, can be achieved. The promotion and development of social pedagogically-informed practice must, however, be accompanied by shifts in policy to ensure that the organisational context in which practitioners operate, protects and promotes their professional agency in order that meaningful connections can be made.

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